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Attacking Poverty

Building Solidarity

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UNITED NATIONS

Families: The Heart of Society

Historically, families have been at the heart of societies, both sociologically and symbolically. But, in today's rapidly evolving world, what actually constitutes "a family"? In population censuses and other data sources, a family/household is defined as "a group of two or more persons living together who make common provision for food or other essentials for living, and who are related to a specific degree through blood, adoption or marriage (including consensual unions".

The Situation

The composition and circumstances of families differ vastly within and across societies. For example:

♦ Families vary in size, on national average, from 2.2 members in Sweden and Denmark to 7.1 members in Iraq;

♦ While the majority of adults in industrialized countries are married by the age of 30, the average age at marriage for women drops precipitously in developing regions; half the women in Africa, 40 per cent of Asian women and 30 per cent of Latin American women are already married by the time they are 18 years old. On the Indian sub-continent, some are as young as 10 or 11 years old;

♦ Fatherhood is often off-site, with fathers spending, on global average, less than one hour a day alone with their children ; Hong Kong fathers invested only six minutes a day, while, in the US, only four out of 3,600 men in one study provided full-time care for their children;

♦ Parenthood outside formal marriage is becoming increasingly commonplace in many areas: for example, in the UK, half of all births in 1990 were to single women;

♦ The proportion of children under five ranges from more than 20 per cent in developing African countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi and Rwanda, to as low as 5.5 per cent and 5.0 per cent in industrialized countries, such as Japan and Italy, respectively;

♦ Violence in the family is also increasing: it is estimated that 4 per cent of all the children in the US and Western Europe experience serious violence within the home each year;

♦ The proportion of elderly (60+ years) ranges from a low of 2.1 per cent in Kuwait to less than 5 per cent in countries such as Zambia, Syria and Sri Lanka to highs in excess of 20 per cent—a fifth of the entire population — in many countries of Western Europe (e.g., Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland and the UK.

♦ Even in the so-called "developed" countries of the European Union (EU), one fifth of the elderly population live in relative poverty, often isolated in urban ghettos without the support of an expanded family structure.

The Issues

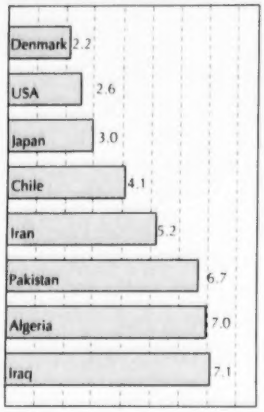
It is evident from the foregoing that families everywhere need support to perform their crucial functions, and to meet the demands of change. Homelessness and hunger, poverty and disease, joblessness and social exclusion, human rights abuses, crime and violence are only some of the serious problems that families around the world confront on a daily basis. These problems exact a heavy toll on individuals and families, seriously compromising the capacity of communities and nations to achieve their full potential.

In the absence of alternative mechanisms, the erosion of the welfare state has placed tremendous burdens on families, magnifying the responsibilities they have always carried for the care of vulnerable members of society. Economic change, retrenchment and structural adjustment programmes affect families' abilities to function effectively. When social safety nets are inadequate or dysfunctional, women inevitably have to fill the gap.

Poverty: Among the social ills that place families at risk, perhaps none is more pervasive or destructive than poverty. Abject poverty afflicts

Average Family Size

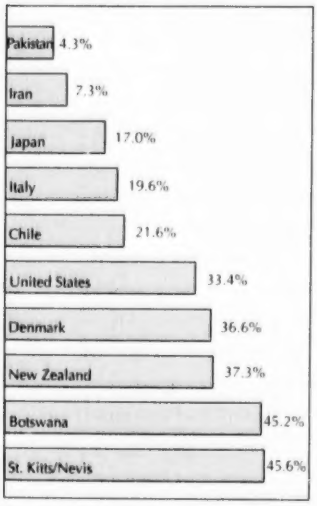
Number of family members



Source: United Nations Statistical Chart on World Families (ST/ESA/STAT/SERS/Y/7),1993.

Female-headed Households

Percentage of total households



Source: United Nations Statistical Chart on World Families (ST/ESA/STAT/SERS/Y/7),1993.

some 20 per cent of the world's population, who struggle to meet basic needs. Poverty generates many problems within families, yet it is largely through families that the poor seek to cope with its effects. Some forms of families, notably single-parent families, are disproportionately overrepresented among the poor in many countries. For example:

♦ Today, between one quarter and one third of all households worldwide are headed by single parents, of whom 90 per cent are women;

♦ In certain Caribbean countries, female-headed households account for almost half of all families;

Unemployment: During the 1990s more than 80 per cent of global population growth will take place in cities. As migration to cities increases, families are split apart or must cope with increasingly difficult circumstances, not the least of which is joblessness. Already half of humanity is urbanized and migration from rural to urban areas is rapidly changing the shape and behaviour of families: 70 to 95 per cent of new housing in most developing world cities is unauthorized, because poor families cannot afford formal housing.

Industrialized countries are not immune: for example, a recent UNDP-sponsored mayors' conference revealed that:

♦ Unemployment was perceived by the majority of over 130 participating mayors as their prime area of concern;

♦ Unemployment in Helsinki has hit 18 per cent and the municipal government expressed anxiety that youth unemployment would lead to "a permanent marginalization of our young people".

Families are often compelled to assume adaptive strategies which are destructive to the health of individuals and societies. When economics force family members to migrate in search of employment, when political problem-solving breaks down and war is waged to solve disputes, when excessive consumption ravages the environment or when poverty reaches epic proportions it has in some areas of the world, then families are seriously compromised.

Flux and Social Disintegration: We are, to a great extent, witnessing what might be described as the reorganization of the family as the pace of change to which it is subjected quickens. This is reflected in the shrinking of extended families into nuclear and single-parent families within the space of a few decades. However, family policies and programmes often lag behind, notably with respect to gender equality and the rights of the most vulnerable members of families. Only one of the tragic examples is the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which is striking hard at families in many parts of the world:

♦ More than 1 million HIV-infected children have already been born;

♦ Projections for Central and East African countries suggest that in the 1990s more than 5 million children will be orphaned by AIDS;

♦ Many of these children have to care for sick or dying parents, while many of their grandparents have to care for them; WHO estimates that 10 million children will have lost their parents to AIDS by the year 2000.

Approaches

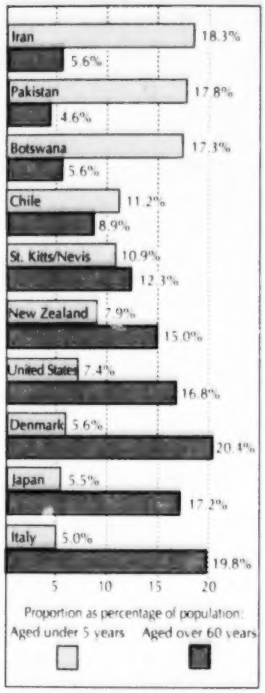
Families, the basic social units of all societies, are in danger of extinction in some areas. Yet, as the primary source of nurturing and care, and a conduit for the transmission of values, culture and information, the social institution of the family, which provides the basis for a more holistic approach to the social development process, should be supported for the benefit of all society.

Ideally, families form an oasis of caring in a competitive world. They look after family members who are very young, elderly, ill or disabled. Even in industrialized countries, families continue to be the primary caring institutions. The productive capacity and stability of societies as a whole is likewise heavily reliant upon the supportive caring activities of families. Families are the social group charged with the principal responsibility for the care, protection and socialization of the young.

As the source and immediate environment for future generations, families are, first and foremost, the basic instrument through which children acquire the knowledge and skills to serve them as adults. Intergenerational understanding and equity are basic principles of a just and civil society and are likewise a major requirement of healthy family life.

Families: Caring and Coping

The table below reflects the family's special responsibilities for its vulnerable members.



Source: United Nations Statistical Chart on World Families (ST/ESA/STAT/SER.S/7),1993.

It is also within families that tolerance must be practised and learned, as a precondition for cross-cultural, international and interracial understanding in the greater society. The needs of minority groups, migrants and refugees must be appreciated within families, as the basic instrument of education for tolerance and peace.

In a larger context, the role of families as producers and consumers is a vital one. As micro-enterprise employers, families contribute to the maintenance and development of healthy societies by buffering the ill effects of unemployment. Similarly, the "employee-maintenance" role of families should be recognized and strengthened to support the expansion of productive employment.

The relationship between families and the workplace, gender equity in employment, child care, the distribution of domestic work in the home and caring responsibilities for vulnerable members of society are all interlinked. To underscore this, the United Nations General Assembly, in its resolution 44/82 of 8 December 1989, proclaimed 1994 as the International Year of the Family, with the theme: "Family: resources and responsibilities in a changing world". "Building the Smallest Democracy at the Heart of Society"—the Year's motto—reflects the pivotal role families play in ensuring the well-being of society and expresses the conviction that families should provide an environment where all family members enjoy the full measure of their human rights as a precondition for development.

One of the major objectives of the Year is the achievement of gender equity in the family and the equal sharing of responsibilities, for reproductive as well as productive work, within it. The double burden of paid labour and unpaid reproductive and household work still rests mainly with women. Without gender equity, there can be no "democracy at the heart of society".

Future Priorities

Future socio-economic and development policies and programmes will invariably affect families. Therefore, public policy decisions should incorporate a *family impact consideration*. Even if the policies are not directly addressed to them, organizations and agencies, governmental or non-governmental, national or international, must be encouraged to recognize that their decisions and actions will usually have an impact on families, on how families will be formed, whether they will survive or not, and how well they function as nurturers and providers.

The corollary to this goal is the formulation and implementation of *family-sensitive policies* in *family-friendly societies*.

In describing the pivotal role of families in the social development process, as a key consideration for the World Summit on Social Development, the UN Secretary-General said:

"Through the International Year of the Family, we are returning to the basic elements of human society as a primary step towards a clearer and more powerful agenda for social justice. This is just the beginning of a process that will not be complete in 1994 nor in the immediate follow-up to the Year.

"We must establish a partnership with families in the formulation of a new social contract enabling us to face the challenges of the twenty-first century in all sectors of human activity. We must...restore the place of people in development, enriched by our diversity and nourished by our commitment to a world at peace.

"In this hope lies the hope of families all over the world. In this vision lies the prospect of a world where every family can be the sanctuary of security, respect and love."

For further reading:

Information booklet: *1994 International Year of the Family: Building the smallest democracy at the heart of society.*

Press kit: 1994 International Year of the Family (UN, DPI/1432).

Statistical Chart on World Families (UN Statistical Division, Sales No. E.93.XVII.9)

For further information, please contact:

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Sources: Statistical Chart on World Families (UN Statistical Division, Sales No. E.93.XVII.9.
Families, celebration and hope in a world of change, by Jo Boyden with UNESCO, Gaia Books, London, 1993.)

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